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## CRACKER – SPANISH FLORIDA STYLE

by JAMES A. LEWIS

**O**VER the years the regional diversity of the United States has coined scores of colorful words to describe groups of people perceived to have something in common. On occasion, these words, often pejorative in connotation, have worked their way into other languages, a classic example being the term Yankee. One of the more expressive regional terms to find its way into a foreign language has been the word *cracker*, defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a “contemptuous name in [the] Southern States of N. America [applied] to the ‘poor whites’: Whence familiarly, to the native whites of Georgia and Florida.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, few modern expressions relating to the white population of the American South have had a more disparaging meaning. For a number of historical reasons, this word found a brief life in the Spanish language. To understand why *cracker* was incorporated into Spanish, it is important to know the etymological development of the word.

As part of the English language, *cracker* first appeared in the time of Shakespeare, if not earlier, when it apparently meant a braggart or talker. Scholars have allowed their imaginations free rein in trying to connect the Old and New World sense of the

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1. James Augustus Henry Murray, ed., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 13 vols. (Oxford, 1933), II, 1124-25. The most recent discussion of *cracker* is Delma E. Presley, “The Crackers of Georgia,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, LX (Summer 1976), 102-16. Readers should also consult Richard H. Thornton, *An American Glossary* (New York, 1962), 218; Mitford M. Mathews, ed., *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1951), I, 426; William A. Craigie and James R. Hulbert, eds., *A Dictionary of American English*, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1940), II, 666; and H. L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States: Supplement II* (New York, 1967), 609-10. Also useful is Spencer B. King, Jr., *Georgia Voices: A Documentary History to 1872* (Athens, 1966), 43, 156-57.

word.<sup>2</sup> As a description of certain groups in the New World, however, the word did not surface until the 1760s.<sup>3</sup> By the 1770s and 1780s, *cracker* was common enough in the English colonies to show up in numerous written documents. Once given a niche in the English vocabulary of the New World, *cracker* never forfeited its place.

The eighteenth-century meaning of the word in the English colonies had much in common with current usage. Yet there were some differences. *Cracker* originally referred to backwoodsmen living in an area stretching from Maryland to Georgia. From the beginning the word was reportedly more common the further south one traveled, but this incidence might well reflect the research quirks of recent scholars who have often searched only the early records of Georgia and its neighboring states for its existence. Eighteenth-century documents described *crackers* as frontiersmen possessing a host of unpleasant characteristics. *Crackers* were notorious braggarts, shiftless, sadistic in temperament, and brutish in behavior. Such men and their families usually earned a living by hunting and trading with the Indians, primitive occupations compared with those practiced by other inhabitants of the colonies. *Crackers* supplemented their legitimate income by involving themselves in every type of illegal enterprise available along the frontier. In fact, so important was crime to the livelihood of *crackers* that it provoked one prominent etymologist to argue that *cracker* and criminal were synonymous words in the eighteenth century. Residents of the more established parts of the English New World used *cracker* in much the same way modern journalists have employed the Italian words *mafia* and *mafiosa*.<sup>4</sup> Be that as it may, it is not hard to find the roots of the contemporary usage of *cracker* in these earlier

2. To sample some of the more interesting publications, see King, *Georgia Voices*, 156-57; D. S. Crumb, "The Dialect of Southeastern Missouri," *Dialect Notes*, II (1908), 310; and Thornton, *American Glossary*, 213.

3. Among the examples of *cracker* being used in the 1760s are Craigie and Hulbert, *American English*, II, 666; M. M. Mathews, "Of Matters Lexicographical," *American Speech*, XXXIV (May 1959), 126-27; John Richard Alden, *John Stuart and the Southern Colonial Frontier: A Study of Indian Relations, War, Trade, and Land Problems in the Southern Wilderness, 1754-1775* (Ann Arbor, 1944; reprint ed., New York, 1966) 215-16; Presley, "Crackers of Georgia," 102-04; Richard Maxwell Brown, *The South Carolina Regulators* (Cambridge, 1963), 27-28, 184; and William L. Anderson, "Journal of Thomas Griffiths: 1767-1768," (forthcoming study).

4. Mathews, "Matters Lexicographical," 126.

American antecedents.

Geography made it certain that this new word in the English-speaking colonies would soon find its way into Spanish. Frontiers have historically been good conduits for words passing from one culture to another.<sup>5</sup> The Spanish border colonies along the Gulf of Mexico— East Florida, West Florida, and Louisiana— maintained a lengthy frontier of several thousand miles with the English dominions of North America. In the eighteenth century, the Anglo-American population constantly crossed this frontier and pushed the border ever further south and west. In many ways, Spanish residents along this border had more contact with English-speaking frontiersmen than did the inhabitants of older English settlements along the eastern seaboard. It is not surprising, hence, that Spanish officials wrote about *crackers*. These officials had to deal with the aggressive behavior of their neighbors. The following report was one of the earliest, if not the first Spanish document to employ the word *cracker*.

Don Vicente Manuel de Zéspedes y Velasco, author of this report, had every reason to know something about *crackers*.<sup>6</sup> Zéspedes was an experienced Spanish officer who served his king as governor of East Florida from 1784 to 1790, a troublesome and turbulent period for this Spanish colony. Spain had just reacquired East Florida from Great Britain in 1783 as part of the Treaty of Paris ending the American Revolution. Zéspedes not only had to concern himself with populating his province with loyal Spanish subjects, but he also had to spend considerable time worrying about the citizens of the new country that had just emerged along his northern border, particularly the American residents of the Carolinas and Georgia. Although he had no love

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5. A classic example in American history is the Spanish contribution to the vocabulary of cattle ranching, see Donald E. Worcester, "The Significance of the Spanish Borderlands to the United States," and Sandra L. Myres, "The Ranching Frontier: Spanish Institutional Backgrounds of the Plains Cattle Industry," in David J. Weber, ed., *New Spain's Far Northern Frontier: Essays on Spain in the American West, 1540-1821* (Albuquerque, 1979), 3-14, 81-94.
  6. Helen Hornbeck Tanner, *Zéspedes in East Florida, 1784-1790* (Coral Gables, 1963); also Helen Hornbeck Tanner, "Zéspedes and the Southern Conspiracies," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXVIII (July 1959), 15-28; and John D. Ware, "Vicente Manuel de Cespedes and Carlos Howard: Service Records and Related Documents," *El Escribano*, VIII (October 1971), 123-38.

for these unwanted frontiersmen, the governor did think that his superiors in Havana and Madrid needed to know something about these strange people in order to make intelligent decisions affecting the security of East Florida.

Governor Zéspedes had a number of observations to make about these *crackers*. In order to make the backwoodsmen intelligible to those who had never seen them, he reached back into Spanish history for an appropriate analogy. *Crackers*, Zéspedes felt, had many similarities to the North African Arabs that Spain had contended with during much of her history. Both groups were wild, nomadic, and recognized little governmental control. Yet *crackers* were not a simple, homogeneous people. Zéspedes divided these Americans into four socioeconomic classes, each possessing distinctive traits. Although *crackers* were essentially anarchical, Zéspedes argued that Spain could bend them to the country's national interest if crown officials understood them properly.

As can be seen from reading the governor's report, Zéspedes had much more on his mind than just *crackers*. Writing his account upon retiring from his post in St. Augustine, Zéspedes hoped to acquaint responsible officials with all the major problems and possible solutions confronting East Florida. Since Zéspedes wrote in haste, never bothering to revise his thoughts, he frequently repeated and contradicted himself. Nevertheless, the governor was an experienced and astute observer of the difficulties facing Spanish East Florida. That he never succeeded in getting his government to follow his recommendations in no way detracts from the intelligent report that Zéspedes wrote for his king.

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Letter from His Excellency Luis de las Casas to His Excellency  
Señor Conde del Campo de Alange<sup>7</sup>

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7. Luis de las Casas to Conde del Campo de Alange, August 14, 1790, expediente 1, letter 8, 529-529v, Archivo General de Indias, Santa Domingo, 2554 (hereinafter AGI, SD). The enclosed report covers pages 530-40. Luis de las Casas y Aragoner was governor and captain general of Cuba from 1790 to 1796. In addition to his civilian (governor) and military (captain general) responsibilities in Cuba, he was also captain general of the two Floridas (East and West) and Louisiana. In 1790, therefore,

Havana, August 14, 1790

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The Captain General of Florida forwards a copy of a report that Don Vicente Zéspedes, former Governor of Florida, sent him discussing populating the St. Marys River

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Your Excellency:

At the conclusion of his administration, Brigadier Don Vicente Zéspedes, former governor of Florida, sent me the enclosed report which he says that he forwarded to your ministry in his confidential letter of last January 8. His purpose is to demonstrate the need to complete settling the St. Marys River, a site that Zéspedes considers vital for the preservation of that province [East Florida]. Populating the area will impede the influx of rootless people called *Crackers*, whose immigration will surely occur if the area is abandoned. Their presence will cause further embarrassments.

The few days that I have had to consider this report, which arrived shortly after I assumed my present position [Captain General of Florida and Cuba], has not permitted me yet to acquaint myself with all of the antecedents to this matter. As a result, I have decided to send the report to you without commenting on its content.

May God Grant You a Long Life,

His Excellency Luis de las Casas

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Report by Don Vicente Zéspedes

St. Augustine, Florida, June 20, 1790 - Duplicate

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Las Casas was Zéspedes's military superior. The Conde del Campo de Alange was minister of war in Spain and in charge of military affairs throughout the empire. The report by Zéspedes, hence, was working its way up the military chain of command, see Gildas Bernard, *Le Secrétariat D'État et le Conseil Espagnol des Indes 1700-1808* (Geneva, 1972), 64-65; and David P. Henige, *Colonial Governors from the Fifteenth Century to the Present: A Comprehensive List* (Madison, 1970), 295.

The two questions that have historically constituted the most important tasks before this government of East Florida have undoubtedly been the weak defense of the St. Marys River and the maintenance of good relations with the Indians. These will continue to be the most important problems facing the government for the foreseeable future. The latter problem has already been mastered and the crown has recognized this achievement in the confidential Royal Order of March 23 [1789], a Royal Order that was included in the directive of the interim Captain General of Cuba dated June 26 [1789]. Since no decision has been made on how best to defend the St. Marys River, the following report will consequently concern itself only with this question.

The center of the St. Marys River is located 30°55' north latitude and the mouth and port of the river are situated seventeen leagues from this post [St. Augustine]. The river constitutes throughout its length the dividing line between this province and the state of Georgia— in spite of the fact that the river bed follows a serpentine course for some twenty-five leagues from its upper portion to the territory near the Seminole Indians. The head of the river begins in an immense swamp called the Okefenokee, impenetrable even to savages and bordering this Florida, West Florida, and Georgia.

The Royal Order of April 5, 1786, directed that the royalist families of British ancestry remaining in the province after the English evacuation be given our protection and be permitted to stay for the time being in the sites they presently occupied. In issuing this order, the crown followed the advice of the Junta de Estado which acted upon the recommendation of His Excellency the Count of Gálvez.<sup>8</sup> As a result, twenty-two families— amounting to some one hundred and twenty-three whites and thirty-six

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8. The Count of Gálvez was Bernardo de Gálvez, hero of the siege of Pensacola during the American Revolution. Because of his experience in Louisiana and Florida during the war, Gálvez retained the duties of captain general of Louisiana and the Floridas during the rest of his life, even while serving as viceroy of New Spain (1785-1786). His advice, consequently, was sought on military matters affecting these northern provinces. For a partial view of Gálvez's short life, see John W. Caughey, *Bernardo de Gálvez in Louisiana, 1776-1783* (Berkeley, 1934); Bernardo de Gálvez, *Yo Solo: The Battle Journal of Bernardo de Gálvez during the American Revolution*, trans. E. A. Montemayor (New Orleans, 1978); and María del Carmen Galbis Diez, "Bernardo de Gálvez (1785-1786)," in José Antonio Calderón Quijano, ed., *Los Virreyes de Nueva Espana en el Reinado de Carlos III*, 2 vols. (Seville, 1968), II, 327-59.

slaves— have remained on the southern side of the [St. Marys] river. Frightened by the impending war between the Indians and the Georgians that seemed likely to break out in 1786 and that finally did so in 1787, these families would have abandoned their plantations and crops had they not known beyond any question that the detachment of troops stationed on Amelia Island since July 12, 1784 (the date when this province was returned to Your Majesty), offered them protection from all hostilities by the Indians. The confidential communications of August 13, 1786 (number 9), and November 9, 1787 (number 24), have explained to the Captain General of Havana the events concerning the royalist families. The government has also stationed at Amelia a gunboat and gig to guard the forests, to contain the neighboring Americans, and to maintain the respect for this government among the British inhabitants and the nearby Indians. The gig is specifically used to patrol the St. Marys River and the interior waterway between the mainland and the coastal islands (including Amelia) that connects [the St. Marys] with the St. Johns River.

Such measures may perhaps seem unnecessary to those who have never had to deal with the character of the majority of adjacent Americans, especially those who dwell in the interior of the southern states and who are called *Crackers*, a species of white renegade.

Looking at the history of this region, it must be kept in mind that this Florida at one time extended beyond the island of Santa Elena in South Carolina before the English first started to settle in North America. It is not known today why the Spaniards abandoned the territory. Nevertheless, it is clear that once the Spanish pulled back the English settled the deserted land all the way to our own St. Johns River, only ten leagues from this city. Since the British were already established on the northern bank of this river when Florida was ceded to that country in 1763, it can be claimed that [Spain] recovered all the rich territory between the St. Marys and the St. Johns rivers with the [recent] restitution [of Florida] to our crown.

Far from disappearing, the insatiable appetite of the English that has been implied above has demonstrated even greater strength among the present inhabitants of the United States. This can be seen in the various settlements that recent [American]

immigrants have established along the Ohio, Tennessee, Yazoo, and other rivers. It can also be seen in the repeated intrusions that the Georgians have made into the land belonging to the Indians along the Oconee River in West Florida, land which Georgia unjustly claims as part of their state. The war referred to earlier in this report grew out of this invasion, [a conflict] supported in the beginning just by the *crackers* but encouraged later by the government of Georgia.

These *crackers* are nomadic like Arabs and are distinguished from savages only in their color, language, and the superiority of their depraved cunning and untrustworthiness. As skilled as the Indians in hunting, willing to dare immense rivers with fragile rafts or to track man and animal through the densest forests, these people erect Indian-style huts in the first unpopulated space fit to grow corn that they stumble upon in order to give shelter to their wives and children. Once done, they move again, always keeping themselves beyond the reach of all civilized law. In the land vacated by these *crackers*, other less antisocial groups take their place. But like their predecessors, these individuals are also enemies of all civil control and generally lack the rudiments of any religious morality whatsoever. This second class of *crackers* likewise tends to abandon their homes upon the approach of a third type of settler. Although this third wave deigns to ask and receive legal title to the land, even they give obedience to their mother republic only when they feel like it. The government's authority is always weak or held in low esteem by the population along its frontier until a fourth class of people arrive and buy at low prices the land granted to the third type. These individuals are the first to become useful citizens to the state.

The desire of the first three classes of *crackers* to escape all legal authority is so strong that they prefer to live in Indian or, better still, Spanish territory rather than live under the gentle yoke of civilized society— all this at the price of exposing themselves to the unspeakable horrors of war with the savages, of seeing their crops frequently destroyed, their homes burnt, and their families slain in the most excruciatingly cruel fashion.

Far from curtailing or opposing these seizures of land, the southern states of America encourage them (just as England did). [These states are] motivated by the desire to expand their fron-

tiers and ultimately to gain control over the vacant and foreign land that the *crackers* continue to usurp. There can be no doubt, consequently, that Georgia fomented and aided, at first secretly and then late ropenly, the invasion that these *crackers* made in the previously mentioned land around Oconee.

The subsequent war resulted in the previously discussed communications numbered 9 and 24. This same war also resulted in the arrival here of a commission from Georgia with a written request from the governor of that state asking that we not send any arms or munitions to the Indians. This request and our response were sent to the Captain General of Havana in the reserved letter number 3 (January 10, 1788). Señor Don Joseph de Ezpeleta had in the meanwhile responded on December 20 [1787] to the confidential letter number 24 by stating that we must protect the English granted asylum in our province.<sup>9</sup> In light of this position, the government drew up a set of instructions and placed them in the hands of the individual charged with promoting public tranquility along the St. Marys River. These instructions have been translated [into English]. A copy accompanies this report.<sup>10</sup>

In the war between England and her colonies, the Indians in general and many *crackers* in particular followed the loyalist side. As a result, the two developed a strong bond for one another. Since the loyalist *crackers* were so closely tied to the royalist and losing side in the conflict, they found themselves pursued and persecuted by their enemies and were forced to take refuge in this Florida and with the Creeks. Those that came to this province brought with them their wives and children. But those who fled to the Creeks (which we know from reliable sources to number some six hundred men) are said to live with squaws, either because they were unmarried beforehand or because their wives did not wish to accompany them. Everyone considers them today, therefore, to be naturalized citizens of that society.

At the conclusion of the English evacuation of this province, there remained here some eighty British families at the disposi-

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9. José Manuel Ignacio Timoteo de Ezpeleta Goldeano Discastillo y del Prado was governor and captain general of Havana from 1785 to 1789, see Henige, *Colonial Governors*, 295.

10. Unfortunately, these instructions were not included with this copy of the report.

tion of His Majesty. With the exception of the few individuals here in this city, these people are all from the best caste of *crackers*. At the moment, their number surpasses one hundred families, composed of some five hundred souls and an approximately equal number of slaves. The increase has come from marriages contracted since the war and from the arrival of new families along the St. Marys and St. Johns rivers who claim, rightly or wrongly, to have fled the clutches of the savages. In spite of instructions contained in Article 11 of the previously mentioned directives given to the government's representative, these intruders have already constructed cabins and occupied themselves in planting crops, all without permission of this government. Until we learn His Majesty's wishes on this matter, we will continue to ignore these violations for the reasons discussed below.

It is obvious that it would do little good to reproach them. If we tried to compel them to leave, we would be required to use force to detain these families, to tear down their shacks, and to destroy their crops. The government here does not feel authorized to employ such violent means without specific orders from superiors. Nor must it be forgotten that the Royal Orders of March 8 and April 5, 1786, have never been countermanded. These orders notified us that the government was considering attracting foreigners to populate this country and that we should be ready to receive Irish priests sent here to work on converting Protestants. In pursuit of this objective, the government had printed the necessary instructions. The corresponding directives about this affair had been sent to His Excellency the Count of Gálvez by the Department of War and the Royal Exchequer of the Indies and to the Chargé d'Affaires Don Diego de Gardoqui by the Department of State.<sup>11</sup> This government is responsible for consulting and arranging its actions with both of these men. As a result of the above, Don Diego has from time to time sent various foreign families here with passports as settlers. Not all these people were Catholics. The government received these individuals in accordance with the above Royal Orders and in obedience to what their passports stipulated. Most importantly,

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11. Don Diego de Gardoqui served as Spanish chargé d'affaires to the Confederation from 1785 to 1789, replacing Francisco de Rendon, see James W. Cortada, *Two Nations Over Time: Spain and the United States, 1776-1977* (Westport, Conn., 1978), 274.

we have admitted none as residents of this province except at their own expense and with the understanding that they must await the King's decision on how and in what fashion they would be received as loyal vassals. They obviously expect to receive the King's permission.

Because we lack instructions on these above points, the status not only of the recent arrivals but also those long ago granted royal protection through the Royal Order of April 5 remains uncertain. All of these individuals are upset and dismayed to find this government lacking authority to grant them land and without the power to permit them to sell or exchange any fruits of their labor.

The St. Marys district today, including the land around the Nassau River (which is also navigable), contains forty-four families made up of two hundred whites and seventy-one Negroes. The land is excellent for cattle ranching. It is also well-suited for the cultivation of rice, indigo, hemp, flax, tobacco, and cotton—not to mention possessing abundant forests. The inhabitants harvest so much cotton that they cloth their families with this product through the aid of homemade rustic looms.

The fertility of the land, the excellent location of the port of St. Marys (situated entirely on the Spanish side), and the fact that the river is navigable almost up to the previously mentioned Okefenokee Swamp has resulted in numerous foreign families, many of whom are wealthy planters, petitioning to become vassals of His Majesty. On the American side of the river there is only an anchorage that is dangerously exposed to the elements. These foreigners are willing to pledge their obedience and loyalty if permitted to settle at their own expense in this district. They ask only that they be given free land. Judging from the number of subjects who have contacted us in person or by mail, we can say without much hesitation that over one thousand useful families with three or four thousand slaves would be living between the St. Johns and St. Marys rivers if we had the necessary permission to admit settlers on a permanent basis. Among those who have inquired recently have been some of the most distinguished citizens of Georgia. One of these, a certain Don Diego MacQueen, is the owner of at least five hundred slaves.<sup>12</sup> He has declared his

12. This is probably John McQueen, see Walter Charlton Hartridge, "Don Juan McQueen: A Biographical Sketch," in John McQueen, *The Letters*

determination one way or another to become a Spanish citizen by moving with his entire estate to the island of Trinidad since he has not been allowed to settle here as a vassal of the King.

Turning our attention once again to the St. Marys river, it should be mentioned that after this province was turned over to His Majesty the government commissioned Don Enrique O'Neill of the Virginia Volunteers (he had once been a sergeant major in the royal British army) to maintain public tranquility and to secure the loyalty and control the King needed along the frontier.<sup>13</sup> Before appointing O'Neill, the government had received good reports about his honesty, prudence, and temperament. Don Enrique completely lived up to our expectations. At the time of his appointment, vagrants, thugs, and sadists produced during the last war infested the entire territory that stretched between the St. Johns and St. Marys rivers. Nevertheless, he understood how to contain, intimidate, and harass this element so much so that by the end of 1786 the country was free of them. Some of these undesirables fled to the Indians. Others retired to the United States. A portion moved on to Nova Scotia, and the rest escaped to the Bahamas. Don Enrique also resisted permitting new people of such character to settle in the area and cracked down on the illegal lumbering of wood. Unfortunately, Don Enrique died at the beginning of 1788 as a result of a gunshot wound treacherously inflicted on the Georgia side of the river by an American whom Don Enrique had discovered shortly before involved in illegal business and contacts with our citizens. He left behind a widow and nine children condemned to poverty. In his place, the government appointed the present commissioner, Don Ricardo Lang.<sup>14</sup> Although being the most apt for such a job

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*of Don Juan McQueen to his Family: Written from Spanish East Florida, 1791-1807* (Columbia, 1943), xxi-xxxiv.

13. For O'Neill's (O'Neill) murder, see Gardoqui to Johnday, March 19, 1788, Estado 3894, apartado 3, letter 291, Archivo Historico Nacional, Madrid (hereinafter AHN); Tanner, *Zéspedes in East Florida*, 188-89. He also appears in a number of letters in Joseph Byrne Lockey, *East Florida 1783-1785: A File of Documents Assembled and Many of Them Translated* (Berkeley, 1949), 539-40, 542, 544, 548, 556, 565-67. Also Carole Watterson Troxler, "Loyalist Refugees and the British Evacuation of East Florida, 1783-1785," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XL (July 1981), 17.
14. This same Richard Lang leads a revolt in 1795 against Spanish control of Florida, see Richard K. Murdock, *The Georgia-Florida Frontier, 1793-1796: Spanish Reaction to French Intrigue and American Designs*

among the residents of the area, he in no way possesses the admirable characteristics of his predecessor. In addition to being relentless in the performance of his task, Don Enrique never asked for nor received a reward or compensation for the many trips that he made throughout his district nor for his frequent trips back and forth from this town. He was content with the promise that he would be taken care of once the Royal Orders were received detailing the settlement of this country. In contrast, Lang declared at the end of last year that he had not nor could not attend to the responsibilities of his appointment unless he was compensated for the time taken from his own affairs to perform his public duties. For this reason and because it is vital that the frontier have an individual who upholds the authority of this government, we decided to pay him sixteen pesos a month starting from the first of the year until the King decides what his Royal Wish is concerning a permanent establishment on the St. Marys river.

At the same time that Lang was named commissioner, he was also given the previously discussed instructions translated into English for his guidance. In spite of these regulations, however, we learned within a few months that various violations of the instructions were being committed along the river. In particular, [Lang was permitting] the settlement of entire foreign families without any permission whatsoever. In reaction to these developments the government ordered Don Pablo Catajal (First Lieutenant of the Mountain Fusileers), assisted by Don Manuel Rengil (sole official of this secretariat) and by Don Juan Leslie (the individual primarily responsible for commerce with the Indians in this province), to proceed to that area with an Indian interpreter to discover what was happening.<sup>15</sup> Leslie and Rengil

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(Berkeley, 1951), 39-45, 113; and J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *William Augustus Bowles: Director General of the Creek Nation* (Athens, 1967), 140-41, 148.

15. Juan Leslie is John Leslie (1751-1804?), one of the senior partners of the famous English firm, Panton, Leslie and Company. The best sketch of this company is William S. Coker, "Entrepreneurs of the British and Spanish Floridas, 1775-1821," in Samuel Proctor, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Florida and the Caribbean* (Gainesville, 1976), 15-39. Manuel Rengil came to East Florida with Zéspedes in the 1780s and stayed after the governor had left. While in Florida, he taught himself English. In the 1790s he became the Spanish vice-consul in Savannah, see Las Casas to Conde del Campo, June 13, 1793, AGI, SD 2562, letter 312; certificate of Dn. Manuel Rengil, November 20, 1797, Spanish Consulate Records.

were included because the former speaks middling Spanish and the latter speaks English.

The commission learned that there were some fifteen families without licenses currently settled along the river under the already discussed pretext of seeking refuge from the Indians. It would require the use of force to remove them. Since not one Spanish subject has visited the area to conduct trade (not even with goods covering the basic necessities of life) from the time this province was returned to the control of His Majesty, the inhabitants of the river have lacked in the past a legal means to import the goods they need and to export the fruits of their labor. This is still true today. As a result, they take their goods to the stores at Cumberland, an American island located in front of our island at Amelia at the mouth of the [St. Marys] river. Attracted to the seemingly miserable commerce [of the region], the Americans and a few Englishmen (who pretend to be from the same country as the latter) have taken advantage of the absence of Don Enrique O'Neill to begin to ascend the river in boats of forty, sixty, and eighty tons under the guise of cutting wood on the bank of the river that belongs to them. In practice, they take our timber as well, either exchanging goods for the lumber or paying our citizens to permit them to cut the wood themselves.

Since the Indians frequented this river often, it was not long before a few foreign speculators established trade with them. Using the river to transport goods, [these foreigners] provided the Indians with general wares as well as weapons and powder. In return the Indians traded pelts, bear grease, and medicinal herbs. At the same time, some of these traders slipped into Indian territory near the headwaters of the [St. Marys] river with the twin objectives of monopolizing trade with these savages and creating discontent with the Spaniards. We know that this illegal commerce is carried on by merchants living in Charlestown and by a Frenchman living on Cumberland Island who has contacts in Guarico and New York.<sup>16</sup> We also have the case of a boat loaded with goods for the Indians arriving here from the port of Halifax in Nova Scotia. In order to remedy this abuse, we have allowed a certain Diego Allen to establish himself at the head of

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Duke University Archives, Durham, North Carolina. The author has no information on Catajal.

16. Guarico is the Spanish name for Cap François.

the river and to do business with the Indians.<sup>17</sup> We have required that he obtain his merchandise from Pantón, Leslie and Company, the only merchants permitted by His Majesty to engage in this trade. There seemed to be no other way at the time [to stop the illegal trade]. Our measures have partially rectified the problem, but they do not get at the root of the difficulty. This can not be done until a permanent store is set up at this site (the above firm being willing to do so) and until a detachment of troops is formally stationed in the area, protected by a palisade and fosse. These troops will stop those who introduce fortune hunters and malicious Europeans among the Indians. One look at the map will show that the source of the St. Marys river is almost parallel with the fort of San Marcos de Apalache along the Mexican Gulf where there is a detachment of troops with an officer. This fort is only thirty-five leagues from the head of the river. The area in between constitutes the neck of land that separates the eastern peninsula from West Florida. These two detachments, helping one another, would consequently serve to form an imperceptible barrier to the Indians, hindering at the same time their contacts with the English and Americans.

Considering the importance of the affair, the above is the most exhaustive description that has been composed of the present state of affairs along the St. Marys river and its environs and how [these events] affect the local government of this province. We will now expand our examination to look at the intentions of our immediate neighbors, the United States of America, a new nation and the first and only civilized one that we find independent in this New World. This independence permits her to work directly for her own interests, and it makes her even more ambitious. As a result, the Spanish border provinces need to watch her every glance and step even more jealously than when she was a British colony and had the power of England behind her. In the performance of its duties over the last seven years, this government has come to know the basic goals of the Amer-

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17. Diego Allen ran an Indian-trading business at the head of the St. Marys, see Las Casas to Conde del Campo, June 13, 1793, AGI, SD 2562, letter 312. For more information on Allen, see Alexander McGillivray to Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada, March 13, 1793, Estado 3888, document 27, attachment 1, AHN; Juan Forrester to Quesada, March 13, 1793, Estado 8137, atado 2-66, Archivo General de Simancas; *ibid.*, March 19, 1793, atado 2-69.

icans. As a result of these lessons, there is no doubt that the insidious policies of the United States are aimed at monopolizing not only the Indian trade but also at turning these people against us. By doing so, [the Americans] hope that their designs against our western territory will be easier to accomplish. Once they have succeeded, it would not be long before the Indians would fall victims to these same people, now hiding behind the false disguise of protectors of [the Indians] while really being people with unlimited ambitions.

At the moment there are two major parties among the Americans, although these are further divided into other factions depending upon the peculiar interests of each particular group. The most powerful party is called the Federalists or supporters of the aristocracy, all of whom backed the new constitution established under the presidency of General Washington. In this party are those who remained secretly loyal to England and to monarchical government. Their number is large. The other party, almost as strong as the first, is the Democrats, bitterly opposed to the aristocratic faction and hence to the new government. Luck has it that these two parties rarely agree on anything, except their desire to seize the western territory and to acquire the right to navigate the Mississippi. The only difference in these last two questions is that the southern states concern themselves with these events far more than do the northern states.

A third group of considerable size, composed in part of native-born Americans and in part of Europeans, has emerged from the two parties above. These individuals are deeply upset at the collapse of the hopes they had when they left their homelands to come to America and they are determined not to be taxed or, if so, only at a very modest level. These people resent the efforts of the new government to impose higher taxes and duties than those which caused the country to rise in arms against England in order to avoid paying them. In addition to this discontent, which is almost universal throughout the United States, the citizens of Georgia are particularly upset over the lack of progress in their war with the Indians, a conflict that has caused several thousands of them to abandon their plantations and homes in order to flee the atrocities of the savages.

A good half of the officers who served in the last war should also be counted among the discontented Americans. Not only

were these soldiers discharged from service and poorly compensated at the end of the last war, but they have been treated in addition with disdain by the civilian government now in power. These officers find it distressing and outrageous that supreme authority has passed into the hands of men who in many cases did not participate in the war and who in other cases openly favored the enemy.

There has recently occurred an event which might produce even more discord among the Americans than any of the above events. A [religious] sect of individuals called Quakers have introduced a bill in Congress soliciting the emancipation of the existing slaves and the abolition of all future bondage in the United States. The debate over this issue in the House of Representatives has been long and emotional. The majority of members from the northern states have supported the bill, while all of the southern representatives, without a single exception, have opposed the measure. Some southern members have indicated that acceptance of the bill would be a sure path towards dissolving the nation. For the time-being, nothing has come from this debate, but Southerners have become so disgusted and disturbed by the issue that many staunch Federalists have changed their colors and have embraced the opposition to the new government.

The above turmoil has been enhanced by the efforts of the government to force repayment of old debts because of the powers granted to it in the new constitution. The old government could not or would not do this. As a result, this province, Louisiana, and other [Spanish] colonies have been swamped by petitions from thousands of individuals requesting admission as vassals to our King.

In no way have I tried to say or insinuate that it is desirable or expedient to accept these settlers into the dominions of the King. Only the wisdom of His Majesty can and should decide this important and delicate point. Nevertheless, I respectfully believe and advocate that it is important that we first populate as soon as possible our side of the St. Marys and then the banks of the Mosquito and Ys rivers.<sup>18</sup> The [bank of the] St. Marys is located twenty leagues from this plaza and the latter two rivers are some

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18. Ais is the more common spelling for Ys.

fifty leagues south. If this is not done, we will never be able to prevent contact between malcontents [in Georgia] and neighboring Indians. Nor will we be able to stamp out the well-known affection in the hearts of these Indians for the British.

It is generally felt that the St. Marys river should receive the initial attention because it is, as we have said before, navigable all the way to Indian territory and because the northern bank belongs to Georgia all the way to the Okefenokee Swamp. Hence, the waters of the river belong jointly to that state and to ourselves. The Americans take advantage of the ignorance of the savage and his affection for the English by pretending to be from Great Britain. This makes it easier for them to live among the savages. Once there, Americans slowly but surely wean away the loyalty that Indian *crackers* of British descent have for us stemming from the King's permission to provide them with goods directly from England. These Americans replace the old affection with greater ties to the United States. The existence of these *crackers* among the Indians is undoubtedly prejudicial to our interests, but it is a problem that does not submit to a prompt or violent solution. To try to evict them suddenly would cause a direct break with the Indians and would propel one [Indians] or the other [*crackers*] into the waiting arms that the Americans would certainly extend to them. Nevertheless, just as we want to guard against the Americans who pretend to be English along the St. Marys river, we also want to take the same precautions along the Mosquito and Ys rivers against authentic Englishmen from Providence. The need for such caution is demonstrated by the activities of the adventurer Bowles and his band of ruffians that we described to the Captain General in Havana in the reserved letters numbered 14, 15 and 16 of October 11, 15, and 18, 1788.<sup>19</sup> In subsequent communications sent to the Captain General (number 162 of last March 12), we informed him that this adventurer had fortified himself on land near the Florida cape, a post he uses to sally forth in a sloop armed with esmerils to commit acts of piracy.<sup>20</sup> It is common knowledge, moreover, that numerous ships from the Bahamas cruise this coast under the pretext of fishing for turtles but with the real purpose of despoiling ships

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19. Bowles is the famous William Augustus Bowles, see Wright, *Bowles*.

20. An esmeril is a small, light cannon.

that pass through the keys. They also take advantage of the situation to engage in illegal trade with the Indians, particularly those living at the mouth of the Ys river. The most effective way to gain the support of these Indians would be to eliminate both the Americans and the English from all commerce and communication with the area. If we could cut off this contact and at the same time staff with Spanish directors, accountants, and employees the present English firm permitted by the King to do business here, we would find the *crackers* living among the Indians disappearing in such a fashion that there would hardly be a trace of them within twenty-five years. The children that they have or would have from squaws (there being no white females among them) would speak their maternal tongue and grow up complete savages. Since by adulthood they would be accustomed to rubbing elbows only with Spaniards, their loyalties would be with us. Experience shows that the Indians like those with whom they do business. In the past they have not had such contact or free trade with us. Instead they have been forced to trade exclusively with the French and English, resulting quite naturally in their affection for other Europeans. All this happened while a Spaniard dared not show his face outside a fort without imminent fear of losing his life.

Although we agree that it is important to populate these rivers, we are not in any way proposing that we fortify the area, especially since such is forbidden by the Royal Order of November 11, 1787, that followed from a review by the [junta de] generals. Besides, the best fortification would be a living wall of industrious citizens. This barrier would have people of means interspersed among those of humble origin to give the latter protection and to encourage their loyalty.

We do not count as a fortification the fosse and palisade that were mentioned earlier as convenient for the detachment of troops and the store at the head of the [St. Marys] river. The sole purpose of this wood fort is to resist whatever spur-of-the-moment attack [some] savages, vagabonds, or British and American *crackers* might attempt.

It is possible, of course, to argue that more harm than good would come from populating the discussed locations, following the old Spanish policy (the one that was in effect before this province was turned over to the British) of leaving the frontier

unpopulated and reducing this plaza to the small area covered by the guns of the fortress. This government has no choice but to obey without question the orders of superiors. Nevertheless, we would be remiss in our duty as good vassals not to state that such a decision would slowly but surely permit the American *crackers* to penetrate and to establish themselves between the St. Marys and St. Johns rivers. Later on, they would do the same with all the territory between the latter river, the Gulf of Mexico, and the narrow neck of this peninsula. This would be done without major opposition from the Indians. Once the Indians saw us abandoning our frontiers, they would attribute such a move either to cowardliness or to a lack of strength, motives that Spaniards could never have in their breasts. No matter how mistaken such ideas are, the consequences would be that the Indians would turn their backs on us and ally themselves with the Americans. It must be kept in mind that after the last peace treaty, when this Florida was returned to Spanish control, the Americans led the Indians to believe that the Spaniards would be content to restrict themselves to the confines of this plaza as they had in the past. The Americans evidently believed this themselves. We know for certain how disappointed the Georgians have been to discover that our government is determined not only to guard its frontier and populate the province but also to encourage free trade with the Indians in all things that they need.

When presented with the proper evidence, one would think that the United States would disapprove of the incursions performed by their citizens and take the necessary steps to prevent more. There is no question that they have offered to do so, but whether they will follow through on this in good faith is very doubtful. More than likely, they will be governed by the example of the British in the past. When our court protested to the British about the usurpation of certain lands around the Great and Little San Fille rivers (which today compose part of Georgia), the British government appointed commissioners (we did likewise) to make sure that the contested land was vacated.<sup>21</sup> Once these commissioners left, the squatters returned to their old sites with the connivance of the local British government. [This old pattern will undoubtedly reappear in the future]. We will protest

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21. The San Fille rivers are probably the Little Satilla and the Satilla rivers.

[to Congress]. Congress will ostensibly reply with satisfaction, [but nothing will happen] until we reach the point where we have to appeal to arms. It does not appear that the Americans are now in a position to offer much resistance. They lack the strength to want an open break unless they could be assured of strong aid from abroad (which seems unlikely to us here). As a result, we feel that [Spain] should take advantage of the current [American] weakness and internal disunion to stop their ambitious desires to expand. This can be done by placing this province immediately in a position to defend itself against whatever might occur. We are not talking about an imaginary event, for we know that there are troops being prepared in New York to send to Georgia. We so informed the Captain General in Havana in our letter number 175 last April 24. The King's envoy before Congress, Don Diego de Gardoqui, has repeatedly warned us about this and so has his temporary successor, Don Joseph Ygnacio de Viar.<sup>22</sup>

In no way do we wish to presume or argue that it would be convenient to break diplomatic relations with the Americans. But in light of all that has been mentioned above it would be prudent to be prepared for whatever event that might affect this Florida. This we have so written to the Captain General on various occasions, most recently in the above letter number 175.

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22. Viar served in the United States from 1789 to 1796. He shared the chargé d'affaires duties with José de Jaudenes, see Cortada, *Two Nations*, 274.